BLACK BELT GOES ONE ON ONE WITH KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

Basketball's All-Time Leading Scorer Recounts His Training With Bruce Lee

Interview by Jim Coleman

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is best known as the creator of the "sky hook," a shot which was largely responsible for the venerable seven-foot-four center becoming the National Basketball Association's all-time leading scorer during his 20-year professional career. Abdul-Jabbar was an integral part of six league championship teams and garnered the league's most valuable player award six times. And as Lew Alcindor, he led the University of California, Los Angeles to three consecutive national championships and was three times voted the college player of the year.

What many people don't remember about Abdul-Jabbar, now 45 and two years retired from pro basketball, is the fact he trained with and was a close friend of the late Bruce Lee from 1967 to 1971. The two shared many martial arts training sessions during those years and developed a mutual respect that extended beyond the confines of the workout area. Lee was so impressed with Abdul-Jabbar's (Alcindor's) martial arts skills and the problems his size presented, that Lee included the basketball star in the climactic fight scene from Game of Death, Bruce's final film.

In the following Black Belt exclusive,

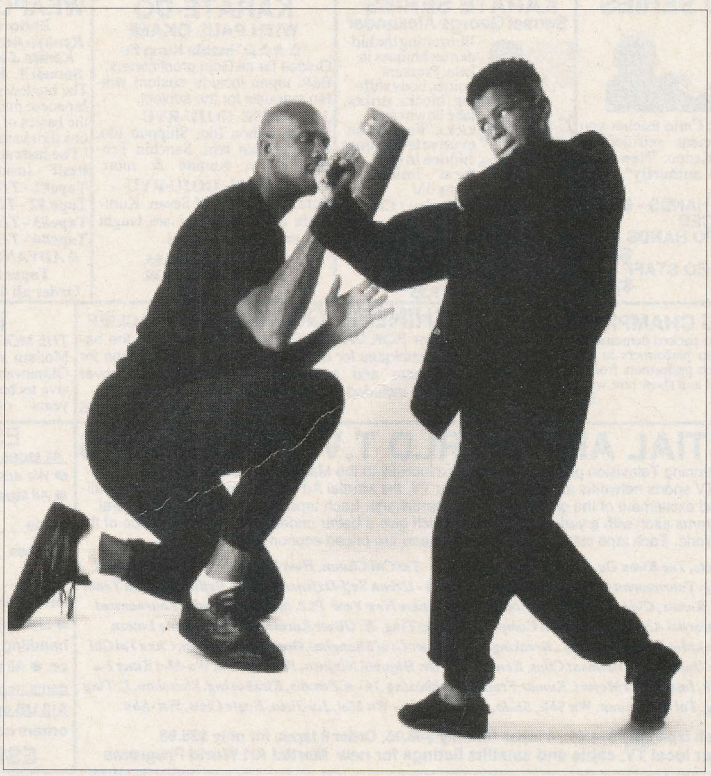


Photo by Doug Churchill

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar often works out with his two sons. Kareem holds a focus pad, above, for his youngest son, Amir.

Abdul-Jabbar recounts his four years under Lee's tutelage, explains the many benefits martial arts training has to offer, discusses how martial arts training helped prolong his basketball career, and defines Lee's nebulous combat concept of jeet kune do. *—Ed.*

BLACK BELT: You trained in *jeet kune do* with Bruce Lee for four years. Was he your first martial arts instructor?

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, no. My first martial arts training was at the New York Aiki-kai. I did a year of *aikido*. When I was ready to start attending UCLA, and I got to Los Angeles, I wanted to keep studying (martial arts).

BB: How did you hear about Bruce Lee?

ABDUL-JABBAR: From *(Black Belt* magazine owner) Mito Uyehara. Mito told me "Why don't you go talk to Bruce? He's doing something different, and you might like working with him."

BB: How did Bruce's teachings compare to aikido?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, aikido is more grappling. Bruce's style was more a boxing style. He was into jeet kune do by then. It was very obvious that he had made a departure from traditional martial arts.

BB: Did you like jeet kune do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh yes, I did. It was very, very interesting. I found it challenging because all of my knowledge of the martial arts (to that point) was very tradition-bound. And jeet kune do was very iconoclastic.

BB: Was it a difficult transition for you, going from a traditional base of aikido to something as progressive as jeet kune do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It didn't bother me at all. Everything Bruce showed me were things that worked. There was always a practical application. Whether it's practical to do something is really what determines if it's effective or not. Everything Bruce taught me was effective.

BB: Milwaukee Bucks center Kent Benson, who you decked with one punch in the Los Angeles Lakers' 1977 season opener, can attest to that.

ABDUL-JABBAR: Ah, geez. That was a mistake. That was total anger.

The diminutive Bruce Lee and the towering Kareem Abdul-Jabbar battle it out, below, in the climactic fight scene from Game of Death. It was Lee's final film.

BB: What most people don't remember about that incident is the fact that it was Benson's intentional elbow to your midsection that precipitated your punch. But getting back to your workouts with Lee, where did you two train?

ABDUL-JABBAR: We would work out in his garage and in his backyard. He converted his garage by hanging heavy bags. Bruce lived right near UCLA, so I could go from class to his house real quickly.

BB: Did he give you any special advice or strategies tailored to your size?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, my long reach, obviously, is greatly in my favor. But people who want to come in on me and get inside to grapple with me could be a problem. So I just needed to tailor my approach to self-defense by understanding my physical situation, using all my advantages, and making sure I protected myself in the areas where I'm vulnerable.

BB: So you worked with Lee on developing your infighting skills?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, just to make sure that if I was in a position where somebody got too close, I would know what I had to do. Of course, aikido is great for that, because its very reactionary, where

Photo courtesy of Paragon Films

jeet kune do is a very offensive type of self-defense.

BB: What other training methods did you and Lee employ?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Sometimes we would just do weight training and cardiovascular stuff. Other times we would work on specific techniques. And theory—we did a lot of theory. And I'd run with Bruce, because he wanted someone to run with him.

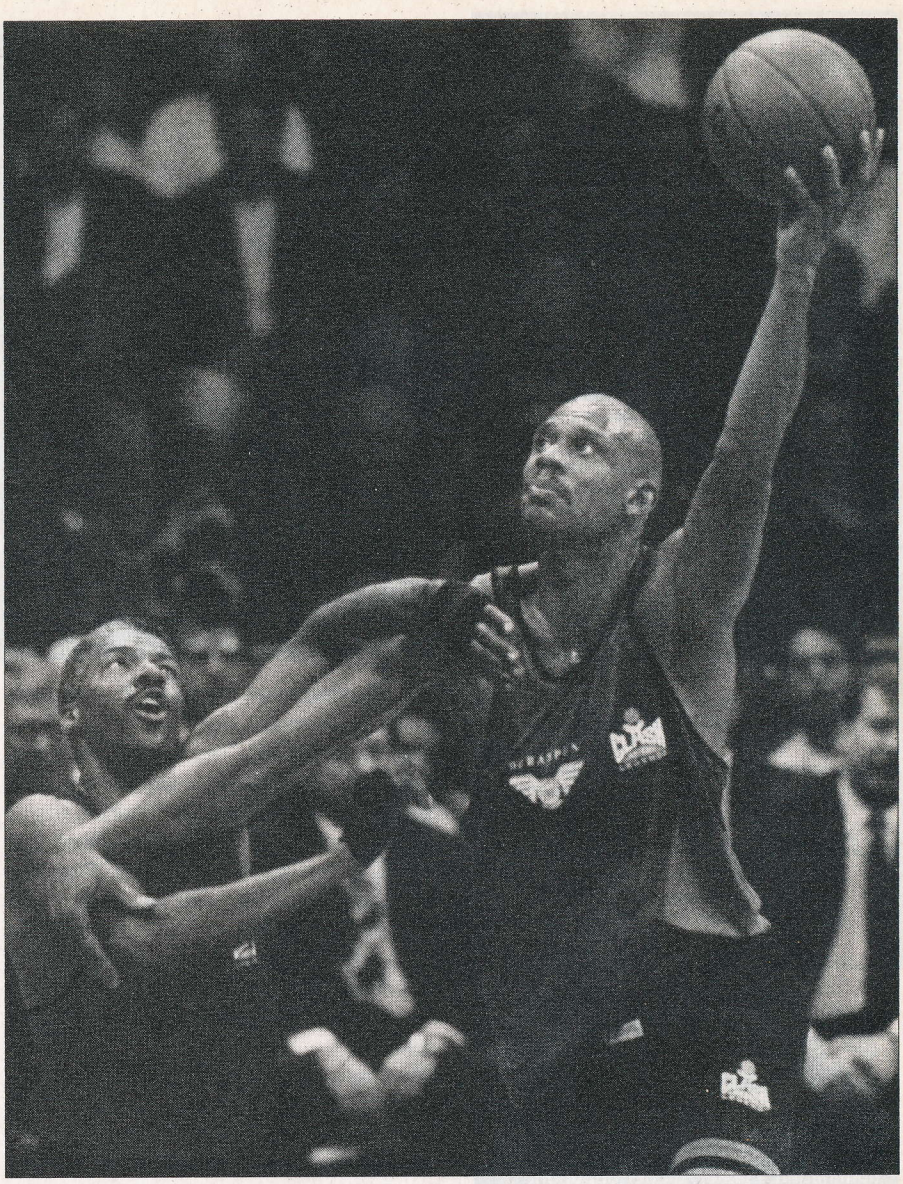
BB: Did you spar with Lee?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, we'd spar a little bit. It wasn't good for me to spar Bruce because my arms were too long; that made it very difficult. But we worked on the (wooden) dummy, and we worked with "sticking hands" *(chi sao)* and practical applications. He enjoyed the fact that my reach was so long, because it made it difficult for him to hit me. He liked problems like that. He liked the problems I presented, because I was agile enough to keep up with him.

BB: Do you feel there is one particular martial art that is more advantageous than the others?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Who you are really determines what your style should be. (Because of my size) I wouldn't be real good doing a whole lot of *jujitsu* techniques. But white crane (kung fu) techniques, for me, are devastating because they use long lines. And I've got some *long* lines on me. So that's how I view it. I learn about everything.

Photo by Doug Churchill



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar surprised many of the so-called experts by handily defeating Julius "Dr. J." Erving in a recent one-on-one match (above). Final score: 43-29.

BB: With your long legs, it seems you would be a heck of a kicker.

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, I am. I've got a lot of leverage and reach. And I've got good hand-eye coordination, and good hand speed.

BB: Did you ever consider a career in professional boxing?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Somebody tried to get me into it once. I said "Hey, I like the way I talk. Don't bother me."

BB: Your two sons, Kareem and Amir, are training in the martial arts. Do you work out with them?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, I just show them applications of what they have learned. Because I really think that jeet kune do is more of an attitude of how to use the martial arts than a group of techniques. Certain techniques might be perfect for one individual, and be of no practical value to another. That's what necessitates learning from different fighting styles and experiencing different types of thoughts as far as how to be a martial artist.

BB: Is that your definition of jeet kune do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It's really tough to define, unless you knew Bruce and knew what he was talking about, as far as applications and what works and what didn't. It's a whole philosophical world that you can get into, discussing what works, what doesn't, what's practical, and what isn't.

BB: Did you enjoy Lee's philosophical approach to martial arts?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I did. Bruce's thing was philosophy. He was a philosophy major in college.

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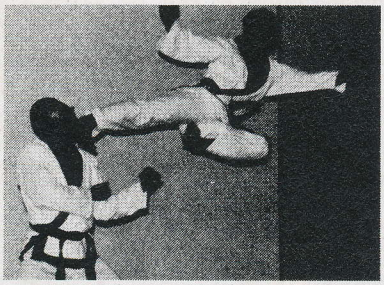

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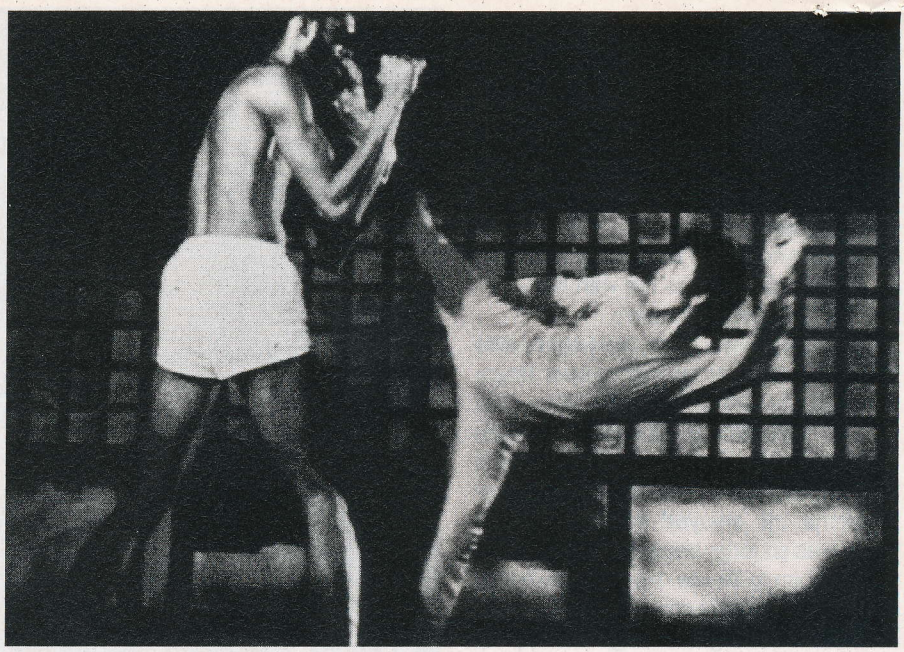

Photo courtesy of Paragon Films

Bruce Lee like the problems Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's tremendous size presented. Abdul-Jabbar was one of the few people Lee had trouble getting inside against.

BB: Was there any *one* thing that you admired most about Lee?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, his total commitment to be the best. He wanted to be the best. I remember he said "There's lots of guys around the world that know stuff, but are lazy. They have big fat guts. They talk about all these *chi* power things they can do, but don't believe it. The guy probably can't fight. He's just taking advantage of his position as a teacher. He's not really on the cutting edge of what works and what doesn't."

BB: Was your martial arts training beneficial in any way during your National Basketball Association (NBA) career?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Definitely the stretching. At first, my stretching was just very rudimentary. I stretched my hamstrings, and groin, and lower back. But once I got to Los Angeles and started taking yoga classes, I got thoroughly indoctrinated on how to stretch. It definitely enabled me to prolong my basketball career.

BB: You also took acupuncture treatments to rid yourself of migraine headaches. Did the treatments help?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No. They didn't hurt me, of course, but they really didn't help my migraines.

BB: A lot of professional athletes—including NBA centers Robert Parish and James Donaldson, both of whom you played against—are currently training in martial arts. Why do you think pro athletes are increasingly turning to martial arts as a supplement to their training?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think it has to do with the whole idea of a total package of conditioning in the mental warrior aspect, which is something you have to understand when you're in a competitive sport.

BB: Your annual Kareem's Kids Karate Tournament, which just completed its third year, benefits Athletes and Entertainers for Kids, a nonprofit group that assists economically disadvantaged and abused children. Do you think martial arts training is good for young kids?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think it's absolutely essential. My oldest son, Kareem, has a brown belt in *shotokan* karate. He trains with Vern Vaden, one of (senior shotokan black belt Hidetaka) Nishiyama's students. My youngest son, Amir, is into *wushu* under Gary Toy. And then my two girls—Sultana and Habiba—I made them take shotokan until they got one belt promotion. I just wanted them to have some basics. They didn't take to it, but I made them take it anyway just so they could relate to it and see that it was a possibility. I have my kids do martial arts because it's the only thing that I've found that really brings everything into focus.

BB: Your tournament, now heading into its fourth year, seems to be progressing nicely. Not only is it beginning to attract a larger number of competitors, but it has drawn celebrities such as Chuck Norris and Jean-Claude Van Damme. You must be pleased.

ABDUL-JABBAR: I'm really happy that my tournament is working out the way it is. We've got some really nice support. A lot of people really appreciate the fact that I'm putting on a tournament for kids. I'm happy to be able to give something to them.

BB: Do you attend your tournaments?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I do. I don't stay all night, though. I usually go down in the af-

Photo courtesy of Paragon Films

ternoon and talk to everybody.

BB: You recently defeated Julius ("Dr. J.") Erving in a pay-per-view one-on-one basketball match in Atlantic City. Tell us about it.

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, there wasn't much to it. He didn't have much of a chance. His whole thing was based on the premise that he could drive around me. But I knew he couldn't drive around me.

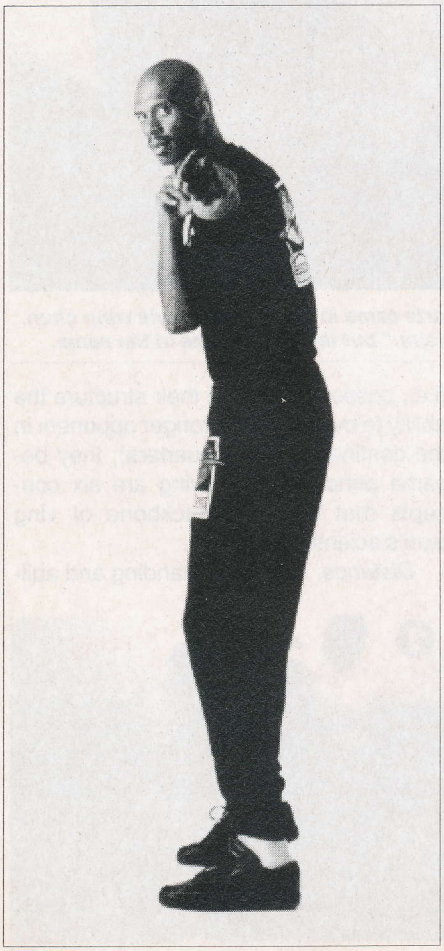

Photo by Doug Churchill

But I didn't say anything; I just let it happen.

BB: In the clips we viewed of the match, it appeared that it was *you* who was driving around *him,* not vice versa.

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, he couldn't keep me out. People don't realize that I learned how to handle the ball early in life, and I've never let that skill deteriorate.

BB: Earlier this year it was rumored that you might make a comeback in the NBA. Any truth to that rumor?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I wanted to try to help out the Lakers. They were in trouble, Earvin ("Magic" Johnson) was in trouble, and I wanted to just make myself available. But everybody looked at it in the wrong light.

BB: It sounded like you primarily wanted to come back to help raise funds for Magic Johnson's fight against the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

ABDUL-JABBAR: That's where I was coming from. But everybody started questioning it and asking "Does he need the money?" It was really bad, and I didn't need that, so I backed off. I'm very happy with the way things turned out.

BB: What was your reaction to Johnson's announcement last year that he was retiring from professional basketball because he had contracted the virus that causes AIDS?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It was very hard for me to deal with. Like everyone, I was shocked. I really felt like it was just bad fortune that came down on Earvin, and I was very upset.

BB: What are your future plans?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I'm trying to be a parent now. I got my boys living with me now. And that keeps my hands full.

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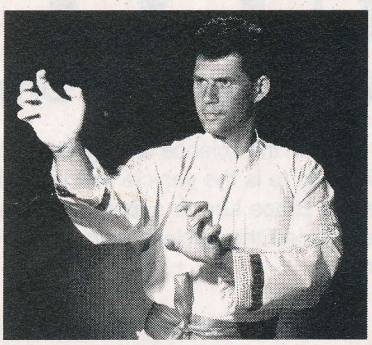

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